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"MY MOTHERLAND" SERIES XE NO. 12

# GANDHIJI ON HINDUISM AND VARNASHRAMA

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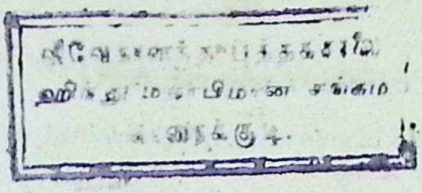

# GANDHIJI ON HINDUISM AND VARNASHRAMA

Hinduism is a living organism liable to growth and decay, and subject to the laws of nature. One and indivisible at the root it has grown into a vast tree with innumerable branches. The changes in the season affect it. It has its autumn and summer, its winter and spring. The rains nourish and fructify it too. It is and is not based on scriptures. It does not derive its authority from one book. The Gita is universally accepted, but even then it only shows the way. It has hardly any effect on custom. Hinduism is like the Ganges, pure and unsullied at its source, but taking in its course the impurities in the way. Even like the Ganges it is beneficent in its total effect. It takes a provincial form in every province but the inner substance is retained everywhere. Custom is not religion. Custom may change but religion will remain unaltered.

Purity of Hinduism depends on the self-restraint of its votaries. Whenever their religion has been in danger, the Hindus have undergone rigorous penance, searched the cause of danger and devised means of combating them. The Shastras are ever growing. The Vedas, Upanishads, Smritis, Puranas and Itihasas did not arise at one and the same time. Each grew out of the necessities of particular periods, and therefore they seem to conflict with one another. These books do not enunciate anew the eternal truths, but show how these were practised at the time to which the books belong. A practice which was good enough in a particular period would, if blindly repeated in another, land people into the ' slough of despond.

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Because the practice of animal sacrifice obtained at one time, shall we revive it to-day ? Because at one time we used to eat beef, shall we also do so now ? Because at one time we used to chop off the hands and feet of thieves, shall we revive that barbarity to-day ? Shall we revive polyandry ? Shall we revive child marriages ? Because we discarded a section of humanity one day, shall we brand their descendants to-day as outcastes ?

## The Vedas

Hinduism abhors stagnation. Knowledge is limitless and so also the application of truth. Every day we add to our knowledge of the power of Atman, and we shall keep on doing so. New experiences will teach us new duties, but truth will ever be the same. Who has ever known it in its entirety ? The Vedas represent the truth, the infinite. But who knows them in their entirety ? What goes to-day by the name of the Vedas are not even a millionth part of the real Veda—the Book of Knowledge. And who knows the entire meaning of even the few books that we have ? Rather than wade through these infinite complications, our sages taught us to learn one thing. ' As with the self, so with the universe.' It is not possible to scan the universe, as it is to scan the self. Know the self and ye know the universe. But even knowledge of the self within presupposes ceaseless striving, not only ceaseless but pure, and pure striving presupposes a pure heart, which in its turn depends on the practice of Yamas* and Niyamas—the Cardinal and casual Virtues.

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* Yamas, the cardinal virtues according to the Yogashastra, are Ahimsa (Non-violence), Satya (Truth), Asteya (Non-stealing), Brahmacharya (Celibacy), Aparigraha (Non-possession) ; and the Niyamas or the casual virtues are, according to the same authority, Shaucha (Bodily purity) Snatosha (Contentment), Tapa (Forbearance), Swadhaya (Study of scriptures), Ishwarapranidhana (Registration to the will of God).—M.D.

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Their practice is not possible without God's grace which presupposes Faith and Devotion. This is why Tulsidas sang of the glory of Ramanama, that is why the author of the Bhagavata taught the Dwadashamantra (Om Namo Bhagawate Vasudevaya). To my mind he is a Sanatani Hindu who can repeat this Mantra from the heart. All else is a bottomless pit, as the sage Akho has said.

## Food and Religion

Boycott of beef-eaters may have been proper in the past. It is improper and impossible to-day. If you want the so-called untouchables to give up beef, you can do so only by means of love, only by quickening their intellects, not by despising them. Non-violent efforts to wean them away from their bad habits are going on, but Hinduism does not consist in eating and not eating. Its kernal consists in right conduct, in correct observance of truth and non-violence. Many a man eating meat but observing the cardinal virtues of compassion and truth, and living in the fear of God, is a better Hindu than a hypocrite who abstains from meat. And he whose eyes are opened to the truth of the non-violence in beef-eating or meat-eating and he who has therefore rejected them, who loves both man and bird and beast is worthy of our adoration. He has seen and known God; he is His best devotee. He is the teacher of mankind.

Hinduism and all other religions are being weighed in the balance. Eternal truth is one. God also is one. Let every one of us steer clear of conflicting creeds and customs and follow the straight path of truth. Only then shall we be true Hindus. Many styling themselves Sanatanis stalk the earth. Who knows how few of them will be chosen by God ? God's grace shall descend on those who do His will and wait upon Him, not on those who simply mutter ' Ram, Ram.'

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## Who is a Sanatani ?

I call myself a Sanatani Hindu, because

1. I believe in the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Puranas and all that goes by the name of Hindu scriptures, and therefore in Avataras and re-birth.

2. I believe in the Varnashrama Dharma in a sense in my opinion strictly Vedic, but not in its present popular and crude sense.

3. I believe in the protection of the cow in its much larger sense than the popular.

4. I do not disbelieve in idol-worship.

I have purposely refrained from using the word divine origin in reference to the Vedas or any other scriptures. For I do not believe in the exclusive divinity of the Vedas. I believe the Bible, the Koran and the Zend Avesta to be as much divinely inspired as the Vedas. My belief in the Hindu scriptures does not require me to accept every word and every verse as divinely inspired. Nor do I claim to have any first-hand knowledge of these wonderful books. But I do claim to know and feel the truths of the essential teaching of the scriptures. I decline to be bound by any interpretation however learned it may be, if it is repugnant to reason or moral sense. I do most emphatically repudiate the claim (if they advance any such) of the present Sankaracharyas and Shastris to give a correct interpretation of the Hindu scriptures. On the contrary, I believe that our present knowledge of these books is in a most chaotic state. I believe implicitly in the Hindu aphorism, that no one truly knows the Shastras who has not attained perfection in Innocence (Ahimsa), Truth (Satya) and Self control (Brahmacharya) and who has not renounced all acquisition or possession of wealth. I believe in the institution of Gurus, but in this age millions must go without a Guru, because it is a rare thing to

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find a combination of perfect purity and perfect learning. But one need not despair of ever knowing the truth of one's religion because the fundamentals of Hinduism as of every great religion are unchangeable, and easily understood. Every Hindu believes in God and his Oneness, in rebirth and salvation. But that which distinguishes Hinduism from every other religion is its cow protection more than its Varnashrama.

## Varnashrama.

Varnashrama is, in my opinion, inherent in human nature and Hinduism has simply reduced it to a science. It does attach to birth. A man cannot change his Varna by choice. Not to abide by one's Varna is to disregard the law of heredity. The division, however, into innumerable castes is an unwarranted liberty taken with the doctrine. The four divisions are all-sufficing.

I do not believe that inter-dining or even inter-marriage necessarily deprives a man of his status that his birth has given him. The four divisions define a man's calling, they do not restrict or regulate social intercourse. The divisions define duties, they confer no privileges. It is, I hold, against the genius of Hinduism to arrogate to oneself a higher status or assign to another a lower. All are born to serve God's creation, a Brahmin with his knowledge, a Kshatriya with his power of protection, a Vaishya with his commercial ability and a Sudra with bodily labour. This, however, does not mean that a Brahmin, for instance, is absolved from bodily labour, or the duty protecting himself and others. His birth makes a Brahmin predominantly a man of knowledge, the fittest by heredity and training to impart it to others. There is nothing, again to prevent the Sudra from acquiring all the knowledge he wishes. Only, he will best serve with his body and need not envy others their special qualities for service. But a Brahmin who claims superiority of knowledge falls and has no knowledge. And so with the others who pride themselves upon their special

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qualities. *Varnashrama* is self-restraint and conservation and economy of energy.

Though therefore *Varnashrama* is not affected by inter-dining or inter-marriage, Hinduism does not emphatically discourage inter-dining and inter-marriage between divisions. Hinduism reached the highest limit of self-restraint. It is undoubtedly a religion of renunciation of the flesh, so that the spirit may be set free. It is no part of a Hindu's duty to dine with his son. And by restricting his choice of a bride to a particular group, he exercises rare self-restraint. Hinduism does not regard a married state as by any means essential for salvation. Marriage is a 'fall' even as birth is a 'fall'. Salvation is freedom from birth and hence death also. Prohibition against inter-marriage and inter-dining is essential for a rapid evolution of soul. But this self-denial is no test of *Varna*. A Brahmin may remain a Brahmin, though he may dine with his Sudra brother, if he has not left off his duty of service by knowledge. It follows from what I have said above, that restraint in matters of marriage and dining is not based upon notions of superiority. A Hindu who refuses to dine with another from a sense of superiority misrepresents his *Dharma*.

Unfortunately to-day, Hinduism seems to consist merely in eating and not eating. Once I horrified a pious Hindu by taking toast at a Mussalman's house. I saw that he was pained to see me pouring milk into a cup handed by a Mussalman friend, but his anguish knew no bounds when he saw me taking toast at the Mussalman's hands. Hinduism is in danger of losing its substance, if it resolves itself into a matter of elaborate rules as to what and with whom to eat. Abstemiousness from intoxicating drinks and drugs, and from all kinds of foods, especially meat, is undoubtedly a great aid to the evolution of the spirit, but it is by no means an end in itself. Many a man eating meat and with everybody, but living in the fear of God is nearer his freedom than a man religiously abstaining from meat and many other things, but blaspheming God in every one of his acts.

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## Cow Protection

The central fact of Hinduism is, however, cow protection. Cow protection to me is one of the most wonderful phenomena in human evolution. It takes the human being beyond his species. The cow to me means the sub-human world. Man through the cow is enjoined to realise his identity with all that lives. Why the cow was selected for apothosis is obvious to me. The cow was in India the best companion. She was the giver of plenty. Not only did she give milk, but she also made agriculture possible. The cow is a poem of pity. One reads pity in the gentle animal. She is the mother of millions of Indian mankind. Protection of the cow is protection of the whole dumb creation of God. The ancient seer, whoever he was, began with the cow. The appeal of the lower order of creation is all the more forcible because it is speechless. Cow protection is the gift of Hinduism to the world. And Hinduism will live so long as there are Hindus to protect the cow.

The way to protect is to die for her. It is a denial of Hinduism and *Ahimsa* to kill a human being to protect a cow. Hindus are enjoined to protect the cow by their *tapasya*, by self-purification, by self-sacrifice. The present-day cow protection has degenerated into a perpetual feud with the Mussalmans, whereas cow protection means conquering the Mussalmans by our love. A Mussalman friend sent me some time ago a book detailing the inhumanities practised by us on the cow and her progeny ; how we bleed her to take the last drop of milk from her, how we starve her to emaciation, how we ill-treat the calves, how we deprive them of their portion, the milk, how we beat them, how we overload them. If they had speech, they would bear witness to our crimes against them which would stagger the world. By every act of cruelty to our cattle, we disown God and Hinduism. I do not know that the condition of the cattle in any other part of the world is so bad as in unhappy India. We may not plead poverty in our defence. Criminal negligence is the only cause of the miserable conditions of our cattle. Our

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*Panjrapoles*, though they are an answer to our instinct of mercy, are a clumsy demonstration of its execution. Instead of being model dairy farms and great profitable national institutions, they are merely depots for receiving decrepit cattle.

Hindus will be judged not by their *tilaks*, not by the correct chanting of *mantras*, not by their pilgrimages, not by their most punctilious observance of rules, but by their ability to protect the cow. Whilst professing the religion of cow protection, we have enslaved the cow and her progeny, and have become slaves ourselves.

It will now be understood why I consider myself a Sanatani Hindu. I yield to none in my regard to the cow.

## Idol Worship

I can no more describe my feelings for Hinduism than for my own wife. She moves me as no other woman in this world can. Not that she has no faults; I dare say, she has many more than I see myself. But the feeling of an indissoluble bond is there. Even so I feel for and about Hinduism with all its faults and limitations. Nothing elates me so much as the music of the Gita or the Ramayana by Tulasidas, the only two books in Hinduism I may be said to know. When I fancied I was taking my last breath, the Gita was my solace. I know the vice that is going on to-day in all the great Hindu shrines, but I love them in spite of their unspeakable failings. There is an interest which I take in them and which I take in no other. I am a reformer through and through. But my zeal never takes me to the rejection of any of the essential things in Hinduism. I have said I do not disbelieve in idol worship. An idol does not excite any feeling of veneration in me. But I think that idol worship is part of human nature. We hanker after symbolism. Why should one be more composed in a church than elsewhere? Images are an aid to worship. No Hindu considers an image to be God. I do not consider idol worship a sin.

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It is clear from the foregoing, that Hinduism is not an exclusive religion. In it there is room for the worship of all the prophets of the world. It is not a missionary religion in the ordinary sense of the term. It has no doubt absorbed many tribes in its fold, but this absorption has been of an evolutionary, imperceptible character. Hinduism tells everyone to worship God according to his own faith or *Dharma* and so it lives at peace with all the religions.

## The Great Blot

That being my conception of Hinduism, I have never been able to reconcile myself to untouchability. I have always regarded it as an excrescence. It is true that it has been handed down to us from generations, but so are many evil practices even to this day. I should be ashamed to think that dedication of girls to virtual prostitution was a part of Hinduism. Yet it is practised by Hindus in many parts of India. I consider it positive irreligion to sacrifice goats to Kali and do not consider it a part of Hinduism. Hinduism is a growth of ages. The very name, Hinduism, was given to the religion of the people of Hindustan by foreigners. There was no doubt at one time sacrifice of animals offered in the name of religion. But it is not religion, much less is it Hindu religion. And so also it seems to me that when cow protection became an article of faith with our ancestors, those who persisted in eating beef were ex-communicated. The civil strife must have been fierce. Social boycott was applied not only to the recalcitrants, but their sins were visited upon their children also. The practice which had probably its origin in good intentions hardened into usage, and even verses crept in our sacred books giving the practice a permanance wholly undeserved and still less justified. Whether my theory is correct or not untouchability is repugnant to reason and to the instinct of mercy, pity or love. A religion that establishes the worship of the cow cannot possibly countenance

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or warrant a cruel and inhuman boycott of human beings. And I should be content to be torn to pieces rather than disown the suppressed classes. Hindus will certainly never deserve freedom, nor get it if they allow their noble religion to be disgraced by the retention of the taint of untouchability. And as I love Hinduism dearer than life itself, the taint has become for me an intolerable burden. Let us not deny God by denying to a fourth of our race the right of association on an equal footing.

* * * *

## What is God ?

To me God is truth and love ; God is ethics and morality, God is fearlessness. God is the source of light and life and yet he is above and beyond all these. God is conscience. He is even the atheism of the atheist. For in His boundless love God permits the atheist to live. He is the searcher of Hearts. He transcends speech and reason. He knows us and our hearts better than we do ourselves. He does not take us at our word, for he knows that we often do not mean it, some knowingly and others unknowingly. He is a personal God to those who need his personal presence. He is embodied to those who need His touch. He is the purest essence. He simply is to those who have faith. He is all things to all men. He *is* in us and yet above and beyond us : One may banish the word 'God' from the Congress but one has no power to banish the Thing itself. What is a solemn affirmation if it is not the same thing as in the name of God. And surely conscience is but a poor and laborious paraphrase of the simple combination of three letters called God. He cannot cease to be because hideous immoralities or inhuman brutalities are committed in his name. He is long suffering. He is patient but He is also terrible. He is the most exacting personage in the world and the world to come. He metes out the same measure to us what we mete out to our neighbours—men and brutes. With Him ignorance is no excuse. And withal he is

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ever forgiving, for He always gives us the chance to repent. He is the greatest democrat the world knows, for He leaves us 'Unfettered' to make our own choice between evil and good. He is the greatest tyrant ever known for he often dashes the cup from our lips and under cover of free will leaves us a margin so wholly inadequate as to provide only mirth for himself at our expense. Therefore it is that Hinduism calls it all his sport—Lila, or calls it all an illusion—Maya. We are not, He alone Is. And if we will be, we must eternally sing His praise and do His will. Let us dance to the tune of His bansi—lute and all would be well.

* * * *

## Maryada Dharma

The religion to which I belong prescribes for our observance Maryada Dharma. The Rishis of old carried on exhaustive researches through meditation, and as a result of the researches they discovered some great truths, such as have no parallel perhaps in any other religion. One of these was that they regarded certain kinds of foods as injurious for the spiritual well-being of man. So they interdicted their use. Now suppose some one had to travel abroad and live among strange people with different customs and standards as regard their diet. Knowing as they did how compelling sometimes the force of social custom of the people among whom men lived was, they promulgated Maryada Dharma to help one in such emergencies. Though, however, I believe in Maryada Dharma, I do not regard it as an essential part of Hinduism. I can even conceive a time when these restrictions might be abolished with impunity. But the reform contemplated in the untouchability movement does not obliterate the restriction as to inter-dining and inter-marrying. I cannot recommend wholesale abolition of these restrictions to the public, even at the risk of being charged with hyprocrisy and inconsistency. For instance, I let my son dine freely in Mussalman households because I believe he can take sufficient care as to what to take and what not to take.

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I myself have no scruples in taking my food in Mussalman households, because I have my own strict rules about my diet. Let me tell you of an incident that happened at Aligarh. Swamy Satyadev and I were Khwaja Saheb's guests. Swami Satyadev did not share my views. We argued about them. I told him that holding the views I did, it would be as wrong of me to refuse to partake of the food offered by a Mussalman as it would be on his part to transgress his Maryada. So Swami Satyadev was provided with separate cooking arrangements. Similarly when I was Bari Saheb's guest he provided us with a Brahmin cook with strict instructions to obtain all the rations for us fresh from the bazaar.

* * * *

## Study of Scriptures

A prayerful study and experience are essential for a correct interpretation of the scriptures. The injunction that a Shudra may not study the scriptures is not entirely without meaning. A Shudra means a spiritually uncultured ignorant man. He is more likely than not to misinterpret the Vedas and other scriptures. Every one cannot solve an algebraical equation. Some preliminary study is a *sine qua non*. How ill would the grand truth 'I am Brahman' lie in the mouth of a man steeped in sin! To what ignoble purposes would he turn it! What a distortion it would suffer at his hands!

A man therefore who would interpret the scriptures must have the spiritual discipline. He must practise the Yamas and Niyamas, the eternal guides of conduct. A superficial practice thereof is useless. The Shastras have enjoined the necessity of a Guru. But a Guru being rare in these days, a study of modern books inculcating Bhakti has been suggested by the sages. Those who are lacking in Bhakti, lacking in faith, are ill-qualified to interpret the scriptures. The learned may draw an elaborately learned interpretation out of them, but that will not be the true interpretation. Only the

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experienced will arrive at the true interpretation of the scriptures.

But even for the inexperienced there are certain canons. That interpretation is not true which conflicts with Truth. To one who doubts even Truth, the scriptures have no meaning. No one can contend with him. There is danger for the man who has failed to find Ahimsa in the scriptures, but he is not doomed. Truth, *Sat*, is positive ; Non-violence is negative. Truth stands for the fact, Non-violence negatives the fact. And yet Non-violence is the highest religion. Truth is self-evident. Non-violence is its maturest fruit. It is contained in Truth, but as it is not self-evident a man may seek to interpret the Shastras without accepting it. But his acceptance of Truth is sure to lead him to the acceptance of Non-violence.

## Note the Spirit

Another canon of interpretation is to scan not the letter but to examine the spirit. Tulsidas' Ramayana is a noble book because it is infused with the spirit of purity, pity and piety. There is a version which brackets drums, shudras, fools and women together as fit to be beaten. A man who cites that verse to beat his wife is doomed to perdition. Rama did not only not beat his wife, but never even sought to displease her. Tulsidas simply inserted in his poem a proverb current in his days, little dreaming that there would be brutes justifying beating of their wives on the authority of the verse. But assuming that Tulsidas himself followed a custom which was prevalent in his days and beat his wife, what then ? The beating was still wrong. And the Ramayana was not written to justify beating of their wives by their husbands. It was written to depict Rama, the perfect man, and Sita, the ideal wife, and Bharat, the ideal of a devoted brother. Any justification incidentally met with therein of vicious customs should therefore be rejected. Tulsidas did not write his priceless epic to teach geography, and any wrong geography that we happen to come across in his Ramayana should be summarily rejected.

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## Child Marriage

Is there any warrant for saying that the original authors of the several Smritis who preached self-restraint wrote the verses enjoining marriage of little girls ? Is it not more charitable to assume that the Rishis could not be guilty of impurity, of gross ignorance of cardinal facts concerning the growth of the human body ?

But even if the texts ordering child, as opposed to early (for early marriage means marriage well before 25), marriage be found to be authoritative, we must reject them in the light of positive experience and scientific knowledge. I question the accuracy of the statement that child marriage is universal in Hindu society. I should be sorry to find that millions of girls are married, *i.e.*, live as wives whilst they are yet children. The Hindus would have died as a race long ago, if millions of girls had their marriage consummated at, say, the age of eleven.

Nor does it follow, that if the parents are to continue to make the choice of husbands for their daughters, the marriage must be contracted and consummated early. It is still less true to maintain that if girls have to make their choice, there must be courtship and flirtation. After all courtship is not universal in Europe and thousands of Hindu girls are married after fifteen and yet have their husbands selected by their parents. Mussalman parents invariably select husbands for their grown-up daughters. Whether the choice is to be made by girls or their parents is a separate question and is regulated by custom.

* * * *

## A Bright Future

If I were asked to define the Hindu creed, I should simply say : search after truth through non-violent means. A man may not believe even in God and shall call himself a Hindu. Hinduism is a relentless pursuit after truth and if to-day it has become moribund, inactive, irresponsive to growth, it is because we are fatigued and as soon as the fatigue is over, Hinduism will burst forth upon the world with a brilliance perhaps unknown before.

[Extracts from Gandhiji's Writings]